

JAMES FENIMORE COOPER AS A WAR NOVELIST

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ABSTRACT

James Fenimore Cooper was the first internationally recognized American novelist and a pioneer in the field of frontier and sea novels. His *Leatherstocking Tales* are among his most famous works, but he is also the author of a number of novels set during the American Revolution. *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (1821) and *Lionel Lincoln; or, The Leaguer of Boston* (1825) are early examples of what may be termed military novels. In both Cooper relied on extensive research and in both he used important events of the Revolution as a background for the actions of his characters. The article examines Cooper's treatment of war and the role that his novels played in the development of the war novel genre.

KEYWORDS

historical novel; American Revolution; war in fiction; battlefield realism; James Fenimore Cooper

The beginnings of American writing about war date back to the 1820s, when the first novels dealing with the War of Independence appeared. The Revolution was used as a setting for a handful of gothic or sentimental novels, but until the publication of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (1821), no work appeared that could be described as a war novel. Later in the decade, Cooper wrote another novel that is set during the Revolution, *Lionel Lincoln; or, The Leaguer of Boston* (1825); it is these two novels that I will analyze in this article. Literary critics deem both works to be historical novels. According to Ernst E. Leisy, "a historical novel is a novel the action of which is laid in an earlier time—how much earlier remains an open question, but it must be readily identifiable past time."¹ That more than thirty years had elapsed between the end of the War of Independence and the publication of the novels seems to be a sufficient time to consider them to be historical novels. The fact is that beginning with Cooper's work, the reader is exclusively dependent on the historical novel for a fictional interpretation of war.

James Fenimore Cooper began his literary career rather late, when he was thirty-one. Before this time he managed to attend Yale (he was dismissed for misbehavior after two years), serve as a midshipman in the U.S. Navy, marry Susan De Lancey, and settle in Westchester County, New York. At the beginning of the 1820s, one would hardly believe that Cooper would become an

1. Quoted in Wayne Charles Miller, *An Armed America: Its Face in Fiction; A History of the American Military Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 9.

internationally acclaimed American writer. According to a well-known story, he began his career after reading aloud a new English novel, throwing it away in disgust and exclaiming that he could write a better book himself.² His first novel, named *Precaution* (1820), was written in the style of Jane Austen's domestic romances. It was a failure, but Cooper had learned that he could indeed write a novel. Financial difficulties forced him to write another one, and *The Spy* became an immediate success. During the following six years, James Fenimore Cooper became the most famous American writer and a pioneer in several genres, namely historical, espionage, and sea novels, although it was his frontier novels which gained him international praise.

The period in which Cooper wrote *The Spy* favored historical novels. In 1814, Sir Walter Scott published *Waverley*, considered the first historical novel ever written, and, like his other later works, it became an immediate bestseller in the United States. In the 1820s, historical novels became the most popular literary form.³ More than fifty years had elapsed since the beginning of the War of Independence before it too became a subject for the authors of historical novels. The 1820s were also a time of great nationalistic feeling that followed the little-known War of 1812 between the US and Britain, and some authors, including James Fenimore Cooper, quickly seized the opportunity to write on the subject. Historical romance, which Cooper adopted from Scott, seemed to be the most appropriate vehicle for the topic. Three out of the six novels Cooper wrote before 1826 use the War of Independence as a setting.

Besides the fact that Cooper lived in a period suitable for writing historical novels, he also became acquainted with several prominent personalities of the Revolutionary period. He was born in 1789, six years after the end of the war, so he did not have any personal recollections of the war. Cooper's family did not participate in the Revolution, but since his father, Judge William Cooper, was an influential man with influential contacts, he introduced his son to such Founding Fathers as John Jay and Alexander Hamilton. During his youth, Fenimore Cooper certainly heard several stories from this crucial period in the history of the young country.⁴ Cooper gained an even more important connection with the Revolution by his marriage to Susan De Lancey, whose family were amongst the most prominent Loyalists in New York. Several members of the family participated in the War and Susan's uncle, Colonel James de Lancey, served as a commander of the unit of irregular Cowboys, whom I will mention later.⁵ The De Lancey family was one of the reasons why Cooper so frequently exploits the theme of loyalty in his Revolutionary novels.

2. See Donald A. Ringe, *James Fenimore Cooper* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), 1.

3. See Kennedy Williams, Jr., "Cooper's Use of American History," in *James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art; or, Getting Under Way*, ed. George A. Test, Papers from the Cooper Seminar 1 (Oneonta: State University of New York College at Oneonta, 1979), <http://external.oneonta.edu/cooper/articles/suny/1978sunny-williams.html>.

4. See Williams, "American History."

5. See Wayne Franklin, "Introduction," in *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground*, by James Fenimore Cooper (New York: Penguin, 1997), xiv.

According to Cooper, it was John Jay, a former Chief Justice, who gave him the idea of writing *The Spy*. During one of their discussions of Revolutionary incidents, Jay mentioned to Cooper that during the War he had repeatedly used the services of an anonymous spy. This man, of low social standing, provided Jay with vast amounts of valuable information about the British at great cost and personal suffering. When Jay offered him money, the anonymous spy refused, claiming that the country needed all the means it possessed.⁶ Another source of inspiration for Cooper was Westchester County, in which the author spent a substantial part of the 1820s. During the period, he became well acquainted with the topography of the region and he used this knowledge in his novel. Several participants in the War still lived in the region and Cooper heard plenty of stories associated with the Revolution from them.

As mentioned earlier, *The Spy* was Cooper's second novel. He chose an attractive setting, rich in revolutionary history. The "neutral ground" of the novel is Westchester County in New York, a territory that is fully controlled by neither side. This fact allows groups of partisans claiming allegiance to the Patriots, or the British, to roam freely and wreak havoc on the civilian population. Westchester County also became famous for one of the earliest documented cases of espionage in American history.

On a cool autumn morning in 1780, Major John André, the adjutant-general of the royal forces in New York, was stopped by three Skinners, partisans claiming allegiance to the Patriots, when approaching a bridge over a small brook. André, wearing civilian garments and traveling as an American agent, supposed that he was already within the lines of British control. He informed the men that he was a British officer and was not to be detained. The three Skinners saw him as a plausible victim and an opportunity for booty, especially after seeing his officer's watch. They ordered him to dismount. Seeing that the men were neither British nor Loyalist, André panicked and came up with a story claiming that he was a Patriot traveling under an American general's pass. The men asked him for his money; when he said he had none they searched him and in his boots they found the papers that brought about his damnation.

The fact was that for some time prior to his ride, Major André had been corresponding (in code, with special inks) with an American general about the latter's offer to betray America for cash and a suitable British commission. The general's name was Benedict Arnold and he was the commander of the vital stronghold of West Point, overlooking the Hudson River. He could offer Britain his military talents, as well as his crucial stronghold. The papers which Major André had concealed in his boots described American positions on the Hudson. The Skinners resisted André's offer of a bribe to bring him to the British lines, and instead handed him over to the Patriots. In two weeks, Major André was convicted of espionage and hanged. Benedict Arnold

6. See James Franklin Beard, "Cooper and the Revolutionary Mythos," *Early American Literature* 11, no. 1 (March 1976): 88.

barely escaped down the Hudson and became one of the best-known traitors in American history.⁷ André's case is frequently mentioned in the novel.

Despite the fact that the novel is set during the war, and most of the characters are somehow connected with the military, there are only a few detailed descriptions of the battles that took place. Most of the charges in *The Spy* are on a verbal level, as opposed to being on the actual battlefield, when American and British officers discuss themes connected to the legitimacy of the Revolution or loyalty towards conflicting sides while enjoying rather glorious dinners.

As far as Cooper's battle scenes are concerned, the first skirmish between the British and Patriot forces takes place near the Wharton family home (the site of the previously mentioned dinners), which allows the members of the Wharton family to observe it closely. The elements of romance are evident when shortly before the opening volleys Major Dunwoodie leaves his Virginia dragoons to steal one last embrace from his sweetheart, Frances Wharton.

Contrary to the realistic war novels that appeared after the Civil War, where the participants in the battle have only a limited view of the battlefield, Cooper offers the reader a panoramic view. At the beginning, he carefully describes geographical features and explains their tactical use and afterwards he explains how the commanders deploy their units like chess figures. The battle starts with the sound of drums and pipes and soon Captain Lawton's dragoons appear "with their leader in advance, waving his sabre over his head, and shouting, in a voice that was heard above the clangour of the martial music."⁸ The dragoons move with machine-like precision and it seems that their presence on the battlefield is enough for their enemies to be "swept before the mettled horses and nervous arms of their antagonists like chaff before the wind" (S, 84). Cooper spares the reader the brutality of the battle; few wounded remain on the battlefield, but the effects of sabers and hooves on human bodies are not described. The only reference to the dead on the field is rather grotesque, when Doctor Sitgraves, a comic character in the novel, points to a pile of dead bodies: "I did put in the brains of one patient, but I rather think the man must have been dead before I saw him. It is a curious case sir; I will take you to see it—only across the fence there, where you may perceive so many bodies together" (S, 95).

The other battle scene in the novel, a battle between British regulars and the Connecticut militia, is rendered in nearly the same manner as the first one. Cooper again carefully describes the battlefield and the intentions of the commanding officer and the battle again starts with martial music. The British regulars advance in a perfect line, while the line of the militia does not resemble a battle formation at all. Cooper's criticism of the unreliability of the militia is very apt. During the Revolution, irregular militia units were

7. See Franklin, "Introduction," viii–x.

8. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground*, with introduction and notes by Wayne Franklin (1821; New York: Penguin, 1997), 83. Hereafter cited in text as S.

(apart from a few exceptions) more of a burden than an asset, mostly because of their lack of training and equipment, which Cooper, through Captain Lawton, points out in the novel: the militia are “fellows who handle a musket as they would a flail; lads who wink when they pull a trigger, and form a line like a hoop-pole. The dependence we place on these men spills the best blood of this country!” (S, 387). In Cooper’s battle, concentrated and accurate British fire scatters the line of the militia. Captain Lawton, who is the central character of the scene, tries to inspire the militiamen via martial shouts and his own example. He loses his horse, and a few moments later he is mortally wounded. Cooper’s depiction of Lawton’s fall is a typical example of his romantic treatment of soldiers in the novel:

“Come on!” shouted the trooper, as a body of English appeared on the rock, and threw in a close fire; “come on!” he repeated and brandished his sabre fiercely. Then his gigantic form fell backward, like a majestic pine yielding to the axe; but still, as he slowly fell, he continued to wield his sabre, and once more the deep tones of his voice were heard uttering, “Come on!” (S, 391)

The majority of the important characters in the novel are either members of the aristocracy or military officers, members of the élite group, which is one of the precedents Cooper established for his successors. Enlisted men form a unified mass which faithfully obeys orders and seems to be happy and content. They serve either as a caricature or as a comic foil. A typical example of this is Sergeant Hollister, a walking example of simplicity. He enjoys frequent rations of rum, and in the words of Charles Miller “he has no ambitions within the military structure; he does not question the war, he does not quail at killing; he goes to battle happily.”⁹

Despite the overall glorification of battle and war Cooper does, from time to time, offer a brief criticism of the military. Besides the above-mentioned criticism of the unreliability of the militia, Cooper focuses on the issue of military jurisdiction. He deals with this issue twice. In the first instance, during an improvised trial Major Dunwoodie sentences Harvey Birch, an American spy and the title character of the novel, to death, but then postpones the execution until the next morning, which allows Birch to escape. Dunwoodie exclaims: “My duty requires that I order you to be executed, but surely not so hastily; take until nine tomorrow to prepare for the awful change” (S, 199). Birch manages to escape, disguised as a drunken washerwoman, and thus avoids the consequences of military justice. A similar case occurs in the trial of Captain Wharton. Despite the testimony of his sister that he used his disguise only to meet his own family, the court martial decides that Wharton is a British spy: the sentence “briefly stated that Henry Wharton had been detected in passing the lines of the American army as a spy, and in disguise. That thereby, according to the laws of war, he was liable to suffer death, and that this court adjudged him to the penalty; recommending him to be executed by hanging, before nine o’clock on the following morning” (S, 310). Although

9. Miller, *Armed America*, 10.

the trial proceeds according to correct legal forms, it is unjust, for it would condemn an innocent man to death.¹⁰ Fortunately for Wharton, Harvey Birch, who acts as an instrument of George Washington, enables him to escape.

In both instances, innocent characters are subject to military jurisdiction. Birch is an American spy so committed to the cause of independence that he does not hesitate to pretend to be a spy for the British in order to protect his cover. Only his own wits save him from execution at the hands of his fellow-Patriots. Captain Wharton simply finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, and only the disguise he used to safely cross the lines causes him to be considered a spy. Because of the conventions of historical romances, Cooper allows both his characters to escape, and thus the direct consequences of military justice are not confronted and the reader is not encouraged to consider the issue seriously.¹¹

In *The Spy*, Cooper created a perfect image of neutral ground which is controlled by neither side. Regular British forces stand against regular Patriot forces, units of irregular Cowboys (supporters of the British) against the units of irregular Skinners, but it is the local population which suffers the most and is the victim of their frequent raids.¹² Irregular units pretend to support (or fight for) one of the warring sides, but in the end all their activities serve only their own personal enrichment. As Ringe argues, "the neutral ground between the British and American outposts is a moral wasteland where conflicting principles are at war and the only law is might."¹³

The Cowboys appear for the first time during the initial battle, where they are a part of the British-Hessian forces. They are quickly routed under the hooves of the Virginia dragoons and flee the battlefield in panic. Two of the Cowboys reach the Wharton home, where they sense an opportunity for booty and try to steal horses stalled near the house. They unfasten them "with a hardihood and presence of mind that could only exist from long practice in similar scenes" (S, 86).

The Skinners are much more visible and are a source of evil throughout the novel. Under the mask of their patriotic duty to capture the alleged British spy Birch, they rob him of all his savings, spoil his last moments with his dying father, and burn his house to the ground, their leader saying that "the law of the neutral ground is the law of the strongest" (S, 180). The Skinners are also behind the destruction of the Wharton home when they attack it as an act of vengeance, burning it to the ground. Their leader, who by the end of the novel does not hesitate to switch sides to protect his life, is ultimately punished for

10. See Ringe, *Cooper*, 14.

11. See Miller, *Armed America*, 14.

12. See John McWilliams, "Revolution and the Historical Novel: Cooper's Transforming of European Tradition," in *James Fenimore Cooper: His Country and His Art*, ed. George A. Test, Papers from the Cooper Seminar 8 (Oneonta: State University of New York College at Oneonta, 1979), <http://external.oneonta.edu/cooper/articles/suny/1991suny-mcwilliams.html>.

13. Ringe, *Cooper*, 12.

his evil deeds. The Cowboys take justice into their own hands and hang him without a trial. Here Cooper offers a different approach to military justice in comparison with the court martial of Henry Wharton. The hanging of the Skinner leader is not in accordance with the laws of war but, according to Ringe, “has a rather grim justice of its own in that it is so richly deserved.”¹⁴

Obviously, most of the activities of these irregular bands serve only their own material needs. It is interesting that the Skinners, who are expected to support the cause of independence, are a greater source of evil in the novel than the Cowboys. The reason is perhaps Cooper’s own loyalty. As I mentioned, during the war, the family of Susan De Lancey, Cooper’s wife, belonged among the most prominent supporters of the British in New York and, what is more, Susan’s uncle, Colonel De Lancey, served as the commander of a unit of the Cowboys. Such a connection might have prevented Cooper from depicting the Loyalist partisans as arsonists, thieves, and murderers.

By choosing the “neutral ground” as a setting for his novel, Cooper presents the War of Independence not as a fight between the governments and their armies, but as a civil war, where neighbor stands against neighbor, a family is divided by conflicting loyalties, the motives of the individual characters are frequently unclear, and groups of pillaging partisans freely roam the countryside.¹⁵

After the success of *The Spy* and with the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Revolution, Cooper decided to write a more ambitious historical work than his second novel. In a series of novels named *Legends of Thirteen Republics*, where one novel would be dedicated to each of the thirteen colonies, he intended to honor important events and personalities of the Revolution. *Lionel Lincoln* was supposed to be the first of the ambitious series. However, as a result of the disappointment caused by its lukewarm reception, Cooper never wrote the remaining twelve novels.

Lionel Lincoln is, according to Beard, the first novel “ever based on substantial historical research undertaken with the intention of blending the professional historian’s truth with the imaginative truth of the creative writer.”¹⁶ Cooper carried out extensive research in and around Boston; he visited the city and surveyed the battlefields to make the book historically accurate. This research meant that the descriptions of the battle in the novel (the story begins in Boston, in the spring months of 1775, and ends a year later, when British forces evacuate the city) stand above the other parts of Cooper’s book. In contrast to *The Spy*, where the battles are fictional, Cooper turned to actual battles of the Revolution in *Lionel Lincoln*. An interesting fact is that

14. Ringe, *Cooper*, 14.

15. See Donald A. Ringe, “The American Revolution in American Romance,” *American Literature* 49, no. 3 (November 1977): 357.

16. Beard, “Cooper,” 93.

each of the battle scenes is seen from a different perspective, which may be connected with Cooper's own perception of the events.¹⁷

The first battle to be described is at Lexington and Concord, where Major Lionel Lincoln, the main protagonist of the novel, is a direct participant. Cooper follows the fate of the British column from its first steps till its inglorious return to Boston. The battle is described from the point of view of Lincoln, who is in the center of the column. Despite the fact that he is armed, Major Lincoln is only a passive participant in the battle.

In comparison with the battle scenes from *The Spy*, Cooper's rendering of the Battle of Lexington and Concord is far more credible. He describes a forced night march through country where the local population shows hostile intentions and British troops are as confused and nervous as their Patriot opponents. Lionel Lincoln witnesses the first shots of the war in Lexington, but he is not able to fully understand the importance and consequences of the moment. The British commanders try to cease firing into the ranks of the colonists, but "the excitement which had been gathering to a head for so many hours, and the animosity which had so long been growing between the troops and the people, were not to be repressed at a word."¹⁸ The British fire is stopped only after a few dead bodies are left lying on the ground. After the skirmish, the British troops continue the march onward to Concord, where more determined opposition awaits them. At first single shots are fired, then volleys follow and suddenly the commanders realize that the force will have to march fifteen miles through now totally hostile territory back to Boston. Their worst fears are realized when "a volley was fired upon them from the protection of a barn, and as they advanced, volley succeeded volley, and musket answered musket from behind every cover that offered to their assailants" (*LL*, 155). Cooper authentically describes the effects of the fire on the nervous and tired British troops.

The battle scene, seen from the perspective of a direct participant, is an exception from the romantic description of war, since it lacks the heroic deeds which are usually so characteristic of the historical novels of the period. John McWilliams even thinks that the scene served as an inspiration for Stephen Crane.¹⁹ Cooper, however, did not avoid comic relief—this time it is not a surgeon, as in the case of *The Spy*, but Captain Polwarth, a friend of Major Lincoln, who discusses the pros and cons of provisions and food on the American continent even under the most intense fire. During the march on Concord, Polwarth explains to Lincoln: "'Tis morally impossible that a people who eat their pudding before their meats . . . can ever make good soldiers, because the appetite is appeased before the introduction of the succulent nutriment of the flesh . . ." (*LL*, 151).

17. See Williams, "American History."

18. James Fenimore Cooper, *Lionel Lincoln; or, The Leaguer of Boston* (1825; New York: Elibron Classics, 2005), 142. Hereafter cited in text as *LL*.

19. See McWilliams, "Revolution."

The Battle of Bunker Hill, which is the other battle described in the novel, was the first important clash between British and American forces during the war. It was also the only battle during the siege of Boston in which well-formed lines of infantry advanced against Patriot positions. In comparison with Lexington and Concord, which was mostly a one-sided affair where a column of confused and tired British troops suffered from the fire of unorganized but highly effective militia, the Battle of Bunker Hill was fought in a manner typical of the battlefields of the eighteenth century. Cooper stresses this fact in the novel, where his rendering of the battle is nearly the same as in *The Spy*, with a detailed description of the battlefield and individual units moving like chess figures. Williams supposes that since the Battle of Bunker Hill was the only traditional battle during the Siege of Boston, Cooper describes it in “conventionally splendid mode.”²⁰

The Redcoats form with “beautiful accuracy” and “when each column arrived at the allotted point, it spread the gallant array of its glittering warriors under a bright sun” (*LL*, 247). The advance against the American entrenchments is “so beautiful and slow, resembled rather the ordered steadiness of a drill, than an approach to a deadly struggle” (*LL*, 247). Cooper uses almost the same terms as in *The Spy*. The scene in which the British arrive at the entrenched American positions, however, is one of the finest battle descriptions in Cooper’s works:

At that instant a sheet of flame glanced through the smoke, like lightning playing in the cloud, while at one report a thousand muskets were added to the uproar. It was not altogether fancy which led Lincoln to imagine that he saw the smoky canopy of the hill to wave as if the trained warriors it enveloped faltered before this close and appalling discharge; but, in another instant, the stimulating war-cry, and the loud shouts of the combatants, were born across the strait to his ear, even amid the horrid din of the combat. (*LL*, 248)

Lionel Lincoln participates in the latter part of the battle. Cooper narrows the view of the battlefield and focuses on Major Lincoln, who sees only what is happening in his immediate vicinity. Through the smoke he records the number of those wounded and killed and for a time he reflects on the futility of such bloodshed. At that moment, one of the wounded Patriots fires his musket and Lincoln “sunk beneath the feet of the combatants, insensible of further triumph, and of every danger” (*LL*, 257). Major Lincoln is not such a heroic character as Captain Lawton in *The Spy* was, so Cooper does not use glorious terms when describing his wounding.

Cooper perhaps could not resist the temptation and, knowing that Bunker Hill was the only traditional battle, he decided to describe it in a traditional romantic fashion, despite the fact that in his first battle scene he did much to achieve historical accuracy. His “splendid mode” also includes the use of language that is far more figurative than in the rest of the novel and adjectives such as “beautiful,” “admirable,” or “extraordinary” are an essential part of his rendering of the battle.

20. Williams, “American History.”

Despite the “conventionally splendid mode,” we can find several realistic features in Cooper’s description of the battle—heavy smoke over the battlefield or scores of wounded and dead men. Cooper even takes into consideration the disproportionately large number of British officers who became casualties during the real battle—besides Major Lincoln, his best friend Captain Polwarth is also injured (losing a leg), and another friend, Captain M’Fuse, is killed. Also worth mentioning are the stylistic means (mostly personifications) which, some seventy years later, made Stephen Crane famous. Cooper’s artillery batteries “poured out their wrath with tenfold fury on their enemies” (*LL*, 251) and “black sides of the vessels of war were vomiting their sheets of flame with unwearied industry” (*LL*, 253).

Similarly to *The Spy*, where Cooper authentically depicted the anarchy of the neutral ground, he managed to describe the atmosphere of Boston under siege in *Lionel Lincoln*. The everyday shelling of the city, smallpox epidemics, or lack of provisions among the inhabitants of the city stand in sharp contrast to the splendid parties thrown by senior British officers. The arrogant behavior of the British is illustrated by their seizing of the Old South Church, which is turned into a stable.

In *Lionel Lincoln*, Cooper follows the model he established in *The Spy*. The majority of the male characters are officers; enlisted men are, once again, depicted as a unified mass or of no particular importance. Captain Polwarth, “a Falstaffian British captain with exotic gastronomical talents,”²¹ is, in the words of James Franklin Beard, a typical caricature of his class. Major Lionel Lincoln, an officer in a royal regiment, participates in both the battles depicted in the novel; however, he does not play an important role in either of them, and nor do the battles play a role in the development of his character. He perceives the arrogant behavior of his fellow British troops towards the colonists but he fails to leave the ranks of the British army and join the forces of the Patriots.

Cooper’s two historical/war novels have several common features. In both of them he relied on research and used many of the important events of the Revolution as a background, and sometimes even foreground, for the actions of his characters. In both of them important personalities of the Revolution (George Washington and the British generals Clinton or Burgoyne) appear. He focuses on the officers; enlisted men are almost invisible. But what is most important is that in both works battles are seen as heroic and glorious. For the change of such a perception, a war that divided the whole nation, the Civil War, which broke out in 1861, was needed.

21. Beard, “Cooper,” 98.

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